

Dear Fr. Kerper

Is it OK to be cremated?

►► **Dear Father Kerper:** Now that I'm getting older, I've started to think about pre-arranging my funeral. I've heard that the Church used to oppose cremation, but now approves of it. I'm leaning toward cremation, mainly to save money on a grave, which seems like a waste. Also, I'd like my ashes scattered at Hampton Beach, where I spent many summers. Some Catholic friends have told me that sprinkling ashes is not allowed. Is this true? If so, why not?

I commend you for taking the time to plan your funeral. By making arrangements now, you have graciously relieved your loved ones of a very onerous – and often contentious – task. Now, let's walk through some issues.

Regarding cremation, you state that the Church “now approves of it.” Strictly speaking, this is not correct. The Church merely *tolerates* cremation. Full body burial in consecrated ground remains the undisputed preference of the Church.

The *Code of Canon Law*, which expresses the authentic “mind of the Church,” says this: “The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed.” As for cremation, the Code simply states: “The Church does not prohibit cremation unless it is chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine.” (cf. Canon 1176.3)

The preference for burial, first declared in 1983, was strongly reinforced in an appendix pertaining to cremation in the 1997 *Order of Christian Funerals*. The rite states: “Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as the burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites.”

From earliest times, Christians have practiced full body burial, a custom

deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition of honoring the human remains of ancestors. Recall, for example, how the Israelites carried the bones of the patriarch Joseph with them as they fled from Egypt into the Sinai Desert. (Exodus 13:19) Surely, if corpses didn't really matter, they wouldn't have taken the trouble to include Joseph's skeleton in their luggage.

By the time of Jesus, many Jews, notably the Pharisees, firmly believed in resurrection; hence, corpses were viewed as “seeds” of future bodily life. After Jesus' death and resurrection, Christians viewed the burial of the dead as an imitation of Christ's entombment. Graves were blessed and venerated as the site of human remains destined for resurrection.

Knowing of their faith in resurrection, the enemies of Jews and Christians often cremated martyrs' remains as an additional punishment, as if to thwart their future life. It is interesting that a practice Christians now freely choose was once used to humiliate them. In fact, it was the denial of bodily resurrection that provoked the Church's prohibition against cremation. In the late 19th century, many enthusiastic proponents of cremation promoted it as an excellent way of repudiating Christian belief in bodily resurrection and the practice of venerating the saints. In response to the growing “cremation movement,” the Catholic Church, in 1886, officially prohibited Catholic membership in so-called cremation societies and refused funeral rites to anyone who deliberately chose cremation. This ban was included in the 1917 *Code of Canon Law*.

However, the prohibition was never absolute. Cremation has always been acceptable under certain circumstances, such as mass death caused by epidemics and wars. For example, victims of the Black Plague were burned in attempts to prevent its further spread, and in this



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country in 1836, the corpses of the Mexican and Texan soldiers killed at the Alamo were all cremated. In 1963, the Church stated that cremation could be tolerated provided that there was no intention of denying bodily resurrection.

As for sprinkling your remains at the beach, here are some points to consider:

First, cremated remains, though not equivalent to a corpse, are still the residue of a human body. As such, they have a sacred quality, being the physical remnants of the temple of the Holy Spirit. They must be treated with respect.

Second, the burial place – whether a marked grave or a small plot holding an urn – is a blessed sacramental that reminds surviving loved ones of the inevitable resurrection of all human beings. Also, a burial site is a focal point of prayer and acts of remembrance by subsequent generations. If you toss your ashes into the ocean, your descendents, who may long to connect with your physical remains, will be deprived of a link with their past.

Some, of course, will object: “It's my body! I can dispose of it as I wish!” Not really. Ultimately, our bodies belong to God because they originate from God's creative power. We are not our own.

While the Church allows a lot of freedom in the arrangement of funerals and burials, our choices must always affirm the sanctity of the human body, even dead ones, and joyfully proclaim our belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead.

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